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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PARM](#) [SY](#) [IS](#) [LE](#)
SUBJECT: LEBANON: DEFENSE MINISTER RECOUNTS MEETING WITH
ARAB LEAGUE SYG AMR MOUSSA

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Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman for Reasons: Section 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (S) Deputy PM and Defense Minister Elias Murr advocated separation of the presidential election from cabinet formation in his discussions with visiting Arab League SYG Amr Moussa, but held little hope that Damascus, Moussa's next stop, would accept the idea. The Syrians, Murr believed, were fixated on the Special Tribunal and saw the escalation of tensions in Lebanon as the only way to convince Saudi Arabia, whose support they sought on trying to stop the Tribunal, to take them seriously. Murr viewed the January 15 bombing of an Embassy vehicle as warnings from Iran and Syria to both President Bush and the Embassy against U.S. policy in the Middle East. End summary.

MURR ADVOCATES SEPARATION OF
PRESIDENCY AND CABINET FORMATION

2. (C) The Ambassador, accompanied by DCM and Pol/Econ Chief, paid a farewell call on Deputy PM and Defense Minister Elias Murr at his home on January 17. Murr, recounting his meeting with Arab League Secretary General Amr Moussa earlier in the day, said he told Moussa he should meet one-on-one with Syrian President Bashar Asad during his January 18 trip to Damascus and should ask him "one precise question": does Syria want to help with Lebanon's election, yes or no? If yes, then the opposition should agree to separate the issue of the presidency from that of cabinet formation. The election of a president will help improve Syria's image internationally by resolving the problem of the Christians' role in Lebanon. The issue of the government, on the other hand, is an internal problem for the opposition, Murr argued, reportedly telling Moussa that Asad should tell the opposition to keep negotiating, but if it is unsuccessful in securing a 10-10-10 distribution, the Siniora government should continue (in caretaker status, given that the cabinet will be considered constitutionally resigned when a new president takes office).

3. (C) If Asad's answer is no, however (and Murr was sure it would be), Moussa should stop wasting time trying to arrange

meetings between parliamentary leader Saad Hariri and Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun (which Murr dismissed as a mere photo opportunity at best) or try to negotiate cabinet formation. But Moussa should be aware, Murr warned, that on January 28 or 29, the "street will begin moving." Aounists already have bought cars to block the roads, he claimed, and will provide cover for Hizballah, which is using social and economic problems to stir up unrest to pressure the Siniora government. Hizballah's tent city also will be expanded, Murr predicted, and there will be more assassinations from "now until the end of February." Moussa's efforts to arrange a meeting between Hariri and Aoun, Murr reasoned, were meant to calm things down and buy time until the next Arab League meeting scheduled for January 127.

SYRIANS FIXATED ON SPECIAL TRIBUNAL

14. (C) Responding to the Ambassador's question as to why the Syrians would risk inviting more pressure upon themselves by stirring up trouble in Lebanon in advance of the Arab Summit, Murr said the Asad regime had only one goal in mind: to get Arab League members (especially Saudi Arabia and Qatar) to discuss the Special Tribunal at their March summit in Damascus. The Saudis, Murr explained, are the only ones who can convince Hariri and the U.S. to "calm down" on the Tribunal. Syria and Hizballah SYG Hassan Nasrallah want to delay the Tribunal until presumed suspects such as Rustom Ghazaleh and Jama' Jama' (key Syrian intelligence officials in Lebanon before the 2004 Syrian withdrawal) were dead and buried.

15. (C) According to Moussa, Murr said, the Syrians had asked the Saudis about the Tribunal at the last Arab League meeting in Cairo. The Saudi response reportedly was clear: they

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would discuss it after the election in Lebanon and Syria had changed its behavior; there would be no deals before that. Murr, commenting that this was the opposite of the way Syria was accustomed to doing things, i.e., securing concessions in advance, said Damascus was "terrorized" by the Tribunal, adding, "this is the only arm we have against them." He said Moussa agreed, reportedly telling Murr that, from Syria's perspective, the goals of the March summit were to provide an opening for Syria, so that it would no longer be cornered by the international community, and securing some kind of assurances on the Special Tribunal.

THE SYRIA-SAUDI CONNECTION

16. (C) Turning to recent attacks by Christian opposition leaders Suleiman Franjeh and Michel Aoun on the Patriarch, Murr said this was part of the Syrians' strategy of creating tensions in Lebanon as a way of forcing the Saudis to talk to them without first making concessions. Furthermore, the Syrians were upset with the Patriarch and Michel Sleiman (presumably for failing to exhibit the kind of support Damascus had come to expect, and, in Sleiman's case, for executing the orders to facilitate U.S. assistance to the LAF) and had instructed Aoun to attack. This was part of Syria's effort to destroy all three of Lebanon's Christian institutions, the Maronite church, the presidency, and the army, all of which currently would back March 14 in the event of a confrontation.

17. (C) Moussa, he said, told him the Arab League's response was clear. Saudi and Egyptian contacts with Syria would be "totally closed." Moussa himself had been tough that day, stating that the 10-10-10 formula was impossible and the opposition would never get 11 seats. Murr reportedly responded that he shouldn't worry about the numbers, since the real problem was the Syria-Saudi relationship and U.S.-Iran relations, and Syria couldn't do anything without

Iran.

ATTACK ON U.S. EMBASSY VEHICLE

18. (S) Murr viewed the January 15 bomb attack on a U.S. Embassy Beirut vehicle primarily as a message from Iran to President Bush, in light of the President's statements in the UAE, that Iran can "hit you anywhere." A secondary message, he added, was from Syria to the Embassy, warning the U.S. that Damascus was not afraid of its policies. The cancellation of the Ambassador's farewell reception was a "bonus," Murr said.

19. (C) Responding to the Ambassador's question on whether Iran was ready to escalate tensions even further by killing diplomats, Murr did not hesitate: "Yeah, sure," he said. The U.S. needs to respond by sending a "huge message," which he suggested could be in the form of "really serious sanctions." Asad is more comfortable now than he was in 2005, Murr continued, believing that the U.S. needs him in Iraq, the Israelis pose no threat at the moment, and U.S. elections are just around the corner.
FELTMAN